



• THE SPIRIT OF •
CHRISTMAS



BY
KATE DOUGLAS
• WIGGIN •

ROLAND F. COSIMINI



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The Spirit of Christmas

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THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

HOW can anything new or helpful be written on so hackneyed a topic as 'The Spirit of Christmas,' or 'The Spirit of True Giving?' The subject is so familiar, so commonplace that one almost shrinks from its discussion.

But sometimes the old truth, seen by new eyes, takes on a different color, and the blind see: told by a new voice, it carries a different note, and the deaf hear: warmed by passing through your heart, or mine, it grows afresh, as by a miracle. A part of our education and our development as human beings lies in our power to re-create and re-vitalize these world-old thoughts; to re-sense them as though they had just been uttered for

the first time. We hear, on platform or from pulpit, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'; 'Love your neighbor as yourself'; 'He who gives when he is asked has waited too long' — until they convey but little meaning to us. How shall we revive these truths?

Nearly two thousand years it is — as we roughly count time — since the Christmas story was first told; since the Babe was born in a Bethlehem stable, and the Wise Men, guided by a star, journeyed by night and by day, to bring gifts and lay them at His feet. It chanced to be a Christian story, but even if it were not, what of that? Is there one more human, or more universal? It is embedded in literature, embedded in the hearts of mankind, for all time. What matters it if we are Jew or Gentile, Greek or Turk, black or white, bond or free, Protestant or Roman Catholic? All that concerns us is the fact that the story of the Christ Child has persisted for centuries; that whenever it is simply told, it touches the heart of humanity, inspiring it to new tenderness and helpfulness; that it made Christmas; that it brought peace and good will to men; that it fixed a new standard and ideal of giving.

'The little Christ-Child smiled at me;
His eyes were like the sun
And down the years, like sunlit tears
The pouring light did run!'

The story is told in many languages, is expressed in

many symbols, is hidden in many guises. You remember the legend of Saint Christopher? The child of the legend clung to the saint imploring his aid to cross the river. The saint felt the burden heavy in mid-stream, but when he had made his way through the deep waters and reached the safety of the shore, he found — oh! nothing new; something as old as life or death or birth; found that the burden was a blessing; found that the babe he had borne upon his feeble shoulders was of heavenly origin! It is just a legend of Saint Christopher, and there are no saints nowadays, or else there are so many that we pay no heed to them. Which is it? Anyway, it is good to remember that Saint Christopher, in succoring the child, was really helping the Prince of Peace.

Neither is it human beings alone whom the poets and legend-makers imagine as bearing gifts to the Christ Child.

In Normandy they call the little brown wren '*L'Oiseau de Dieu*,' the bird of God, and my sister¹ has written the legend in verse.

‘L'OISEAU DE DIEU’

When sweet Babe Jesus sleeping lay
And shivered with the cold —
The wee brown wren took thought to Him,
Her down she plucked and brought to Him,
Enwrapped Him fold on fold.

¹ Nora Archibald Smith.

When sweet Babe Jesus craved a robe,
A-couching in the hay,
Her own warm plumes she laid on Him,
A feathered garb she made on Him,
That blessed Christmas Day.

Babe Jesus lacked a coverlet;
The rude wind stole within;
The wren brought leaves and spread on Him,
Russet and gold she shed on Him,
And happed Him softly in.

Dear bird of brown, thou tender heart,
Thou gav'st the Babe thine all!
To praise thee is most meet to us,
Thy pitying deeds are sweet to us,
God's blessing on thee fall!

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How, when, above all, *what* gifts shall we bring at this season, remembering the story of the little brown wren? We want to wage war against sordid, reluctant giving; against the thoughtless, tasteless, extravagant bestowal of silly, spurious things, bought in such weariness and haste that the inevitable happens, and on December twenty-sixth, the modern Santa Claus might well hang a huge sign on the chimney; a sign reading '*Do your Christmas Swapping Early! Re-mark all goods and dis-*

pose of them to your acquaintances with a New Year's Card.'

What would be a *real* Christmas Festival? — not for getting, but for giving and sharing! — not for empty-minded gayety, but for the joy that belongs to the day and the season! It might not be a perfect party, just at first, for we have rather an imperfect world to deal with, and our own imperfect selves as well; but we might make a beautiful beginning, at any rate. Let us begin to make the mood right, here, and now, and by Christmas Day we might come together radiating good will. There would be an atmosphere of fellowship and friendliness foreign to many Christmas parties, even were there hundreds of strangers gathered there. Have we never met before? Why, the heart is the true meeting-place of friends, and at a Real Christmas Party we should all be pilgrims going the same road, so what need of introduction?

What shall we give to each other this month, and on Christmas Day? What kind of riches is ours to give? How shall we enrich ourselves to be ready for giving?

Evidently a bank account, or even a full purse, cannot be had for the wishing, or asking, or praying, or even sometimes, by working for it. Yet money is a great thing to give; it is foolish, it is churlish to deny it. Still the delightful fact is, that there is scarcely a millionaire alive who won't say and doesn't say, and mean it too, that when we try to estimate the values of the various

forces that make the world happier and better, money is no more useful than many another humbler gift. Believe me, the heart of the man of millions is just as likely to beat faster when he thinks of the robe of feathers, the coverlet of leaves, that were the gifts of the little brown wren to the Babe of Bethlehem, as when he looks at the towers of the church his money built.

Next, as to intellectual gifts, used for the service of humanity. Well, we are somewhat limited there, too, we are obliged to confess. Knowledge, in its best sense, means more than mere information; it means inspiration, a wider horizon, a larger ability to stimulate and aid the weaker brethren; but it is very clear that a man or woman who works eight or ten hours on week-days, and has a dozen duties and responsibilities for evenings and Sundays — it is very clear that such a man or woman cannot do much reading, or study, or become 'learnèd.' Fortunately there are other avenues than books by which knowledge can be attained, and it is better to feel deeply a few things than to know about ten thousand; but, broadly speaking, the cultivation of the intellect is attended with considerable difficulty, and takes a certain amount of leisure, so that we cannot all give the treasures of a well-stocked mind to our fellow creatures.

Then what is left? Why, is it not wonderful that, after all, the very best part of ourselves is left to give — the riches of heart and spirit? — and there, at least, we are less limited than in any other department of giving.

I doubt if one can ever make a first-class brain out of a third-class one, though by infinite industry it may be developed into the second class, perhaps; but almost anybody with a germ of desire can have a first-class heart. Not everybody; I am not going to claim as much as that — that we are all spiritually equal at the start. Some unfortunates are like human scrawl-books, blotted all over with the mistakes and follies of their parents; some wretched human beings are hampered, not by the kind of poverty that stimulates, but by the kind that enfeebles and crushes. They are thwarted in their ambitions, or depressed and embittered by cruel physical pain, or they have starved for love and have never had a mouthful flung to them. We cannot expect these to dispense sunshine on every side, and be royally generous with their gifts of heart and spirit, though some of them do achieve wonders even with this pitiful equipment; — but that is where you, and you, and you, and I come in! Why not, for the sake of Christmas, find one of these and give something of ourselves, a bit of down, a feather? Shall we search out one or two needy, unhappy, discouraged, lonely ones here or there, who have less than we, and give shyly, humbly, unobtrusively, our sort of ‘leaf’ — just as the wren did? We do not know any such persons? — Beware! beware! what would that mean, if it were true? What, but that we do not draw them to us? Wherever and whenever any of the world’s Saviours, the world’s saints, walk abroad in their little

journey through life, they draw troubled men and women to them as the magnet draws the steel.

A woman of forty years said to me not long ago: 'I am very fortunate. I don't really know any very afflicted or unhappy people! Almost everybody I meet has a fairly comfortable life. Of course, many of them have to work, but they are all the better for that. And people never tell me their troubles! It is true I am rather reserved and am not in the habit of making confidences myself. So perhaps I influence others to stand on their dignity!'

I remembered at that moment a certain parody of a famous hymn by Dr. Watts, beginning, 'Whene'er I take my walks abroad':

'Whene'er I take my walks abroad
How many poor I see!
And as I never looks at them,
They never looks at me.'

Which of us would choose that attitude of mind and heart, so safe from intrusion, so comfortably entrenched in selfishness? Think of having a hand that has never held another's when it needed sympathy or courage; think of possessing a wretched, good-for-nothing shoulder that has never been cried on, some time or other!

If we could ever realize that perhaps our natures might be poverty-stricken, arid and dry; that we had been made on a small pattern and hadn't grown — if only we knew it! Perhaps we could alter, could save



ourselves, if we could be brave enough to come close to life and say to it: 'I am willing to be ploughed deep if only so can I be made tender. Send sorrow if it must be, that tears may fall on my sterile heart and soften it! Give me as much joy as I can earn, or can be trusted with, that sunshine may help to make me sweeter and more fertile; only teach me to live in the depths of myself, giving all I have to give, holding nothing back, lest it dwindle and die in the holding!'

It does not mean conceit or vanity when you believe in those powers which permit you to give generously, even royally, such things as smiles, kind words, praise, comfort, good cheer, courage, happiness, love, compassion, heart's ease. All these we sometimes say 'cost nothing.' Alas! which one of us would say it costs nothing to cultivate a golden heart? If it were easy, if it could be attained by a momentary impulse for good, a transient effort to achieve the ideal, most of us would be saints at this very moment!

'Longing lights the lovely fire;
Longing brings thee still no nigher
To thy heart's desire!
Work, work, and thou shalt know!'

Surely longing and work together will bring results, so let us cling to the belief that the heart of gold is at least a spiritual possibility. Whatever our creed, or belief, or theory, or philosophy of life, even if it be very

vague and chaotic, a glimmering in the dark, indefinable, uncertain, not to be expressed in words; — even if it be something that in our moments of discouragement or ignorance we may call our *unbelief*; — in spite of all, do any of us really feel that we are drifting helplessly, hopelessly along, with no compass, no star, no steering-gear, no guide of any sort, within or without — no impulse we can trust, nothing to give, of any worth, because we ourselves have been so poorly dowered? I doubt it! We do not quite know how, why, nor whence we came here, nor whither we are bound; it is a sort of burning mystery. But we know that we must have been created, set in motion, lighted (I *will* believe we were lighted!), the flame fanned, by some force far greater than ourselves. And if so, then we do not stand wholly alone in this bewildering world. The main thing is to establish a sort of relation with this great source of power, by whatever name we choose to call it; to set up our claim, count upon it confidently, magnify our kinship. Then who shall fix the limit of our helpfulness? If our well is deep like that of the patriarch Jacob, it cannot be exhausted. While we draw upon it, it draws upon the unspent springs, the clouds, the air, the sea. The very universe must suspend payment and become bankrupt before our bounty can fail!

Have I written anything new? Not a word. But in the writing of it I have warmed my own heart through and through, as if by the touch of yours! I have

trimmed my own lamp, if I have not yours, by reaffirming that the most precious thing in the world to give to your mother, your father, your sister, brother, husband, wife, your child, your friend, your God, is yourself; — and that the chief business of life is the making of that self inexhaustibly rich for giving.

In the gathering of such riches love is the only teacher. In a climate of indifference, coldness, remoteness, lethargy — nothing can really grow; the better part of us merely exists, in a colorless, flabby, boneless sort of way. As for hate, it blights, blasts, kills everything that it touches; no hope for a golden heart if that heart harbors hate. Only love, warm love, that makes us participators in life, not observers and critics and doubters; — only love nourishes, feeds, stimulates all that is best and divinest in us. I do not mean the love that is mawkish and sentimental, a thing of silly sighs and sing-song. The love that I mean is strong; it vitalizes, energizes, uplifts, makes us creative, converting the dull, dead-and-alive task into joy. 'Duty tires so soon; love runs all the way!' Only love helps us to bear an injury; only love helps us to forgive. Only love can strengthen the will, clarify the vision, lead us to read aright the heart of a friend. Only love can create the cheerful, the wise, the understanding giver. Let us bring it to our real Christmas Festival! Every candle on the tree will burn more brightly for it, and the light that streams from the room where we meet may be at least a pale reflection of the



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Christ Child's smile, that has been pouring down the centuries, like sunlit tears.

When the Child of Nazareth was born, the sun, according to the Bosnian legend, leaped in the heavens, and the stars around it danced. A peace came over mountain and forest. Even the rotten stump stood straight and healthy on the green hillside. The grass was beflowered with open blossoms, incense sweet as myrrh pervaded upland and forest, birds sang on the mountain-top, and all gave thanks to the great God.

It is just an old folk-tale. Can't we make it 'come true,' as the children say?

THE END

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